

## **Convocation Speech by OSU Prof. William L. Graves, Department of English, December 1929 (from January 1930 Alumni Monthly)**

As I stand before this group of young men and women, today celebrating the completion of one stage of their preparation for a career, I find rising within me a wish for them, a desire, sincere and almost yearning in intensity, but touched I admit with apprehension, as it takes form in words, lest it may never come true. It is the wish that somehow, while striving for and achieving a material success, while living actively under the conditions of a noisy and mechanized civilization, they may still maintain within themselves a quiet place where the sense of beauty and dignity may spring to fruit, that they may cling ardently to their own individualities, in the current of an almost irresistible sweep toward uniformity, and that they may not wholly confuse doing with being, and mistake making a living for life itself.

As for making a living, the chances are that you who constitute this graduating class, like the members of all other graduating classes everywhere, have thought of little else during the four years of your training. And the chances are that the colleges themselves have given you a much more vigorous push towards the realization of the vocational ambitions you possess than towards the realization of the vocational ambitions you possess than towards the development of such cultural impulses as have sprung timidly to life somewhere in your hearts. This is partly because you have demanded that it shall be so, and partly because the colleges have not always found either the occasion or the means for promoting successfully the elements that shall sweeten and enrich the lives that must otherwise hold only what serves a utilitarian purpose.

### **How About Background?**

Put it to yourselves. How many of you can go into a school room and apply intelligently the principles of education you have learned? How many are equipped to undertake a legal practice, or a medical career? How many know how to write advertising and manage business accounts? How many are at home in the dynamo room, or in the chemical laboratory, or the dairy house? The answer is, almost everyone of you, in one way or other of these departments of human activity. But do not stop there. Let me ask you some other questions. How many of you know the history and the capacities for expression of the language you speak, or can read the books written in any language other than your own? What do names like Velasquez and Leonardo mean to you? Or Brahms, and Verdi, and Schubert, and Elgar? Are you happily responsive, or merely bewildered when a well-read man quotes casually in your presence from a great poet or dramatist, or even, though this is in our day vastly unlikely, vents a phrase in Latin or Greek? I once heard an overseas Oxford-educated speaker refer before a body of college professors to what he called a “congeries gentium,”—and the sense of bewilderment in the room was almost physically evident.

Have your years of contact with all the varied subjects and teachers you have known developed your taste to the point where you may rely on your own power to distinguish between what is excellent and what is mediocre in music and art and literature, or are you still able to find pleasure in the superficial, the obvious, the barbaric only? How wide are your friendships? Do you know only the people who play bridge or golf with you? Or have you had exquisite speech with Horace, or calmed your spirit in Plato's companionship? Is Charles Lamb your friend, and has Laurence Sterne introduced you to the rare society of Uncle Toby? Did you ever listen to the discourse of Tartarin or Dogberry or Falstaff? Could you hob-nob on easy terms with Leatherstocking, or take a hand of whist with Mrs. Battle, or share a hot eggnog with Alfred Jingle, or

compare notes on masculine frailties with Clara Middleton, or a-hunting go with Will Scarlet, or keep your head in the presence of Christina Light? And whither do you travel? Is it to Hollywood and New York only? Or do you know the way to the orchard where grew the Apples of the Hesperides? Kennst du das Land wo die Citronen blühen? Would your route maps take you with Coleridge's enchanted mariner to that place where

Ice mast high came floating by,  
As green as emerald?

Have you felt the wind on the heath, brother? Do you know the paths of the air that Ariel took? Did you ever tread the dark street of London that led to the Mermaid Tavern, or go out on a voyage with Drake or Raleigh? And has any hand ever led you to the castled crag of Drachenfels, or the olive-silvery Simio, or to the shady banks of Walden Pond, or to the green fields where fed the horses of Argos, or to those magic casements that open on the foam of perilous seas, in fairy lands forlorn?

### **Each Can Answer For Self**

I leave you to answer for yourselves. And I should be sorry if you were to shrug off these questions with the remark that you are not concerned with literature and music and art. I can only say, so much the worse for you.

This scientific age of ours is the most impressive, magnificent, overpowering age the world has known, and living in it is more comfortable, more luxurious, in some ways, more stimulating than in any other age. But it is commonplace to say that the development of human character has not at all kept pace with the gigantic strides of material advancement, so that life as lived by the vast masses even of so-called educated men is devoid of grace, of repose, of good taste, of the leisure that should be devoted not so much to golf as to self-cultivation. Our terrific skyscrapers go soaring into the clouds; too often we crawl beneath them and estimate them solely in terms of office space. Inside a structure that is a dream of beauty, thousands of people crowd nightly to entertainment fit for and one might almost say planned for morons. If the public mind is toughed to momentary appreciation of the romance in the discovery flights of a great aviator, it will the next hour respond just as eagerly to the voice of a broadcaster dramatizing with shouts, whispers, nay, almost with sobs, the story of a prize fight. If you point me to the number of books published and read among us as a sign that the public taste is not to be despised, I can only reply that in the United States the number of books printed in proportion to units of 10,000 inhabitants is as .85 of one point compared to 11.4 in Denmark and 5.2 in Germany, and that the periodical that has the largest circulation of any in this country save one is a magazine called "Confessions."

### **Effort Required, Surely**

It is so easy to succumb to all that is indicated by such influences that I plead all the more earnestly for you to resist. You shall not save your soul without a fight. You can make a living, one that will bring you absolute luxury, quite without the cultural influences and elements. So easy is it to do this that the history of many a man, even of some with college degrees attached to their names, might be summed up, if you will forgive me for the doggerel, in these words:

He got him a job, he married a wife,  
He bought him a Ford, and was fixed for life.

Jobs you must have, but you are trained for these; and wives you will take, whether you are trained for matrimony or not; and automobiles—well, I read of one man at least who traded his wife for a Ford—a used car. Honest labor is not enough, if you are to feel at the end that you have really lived. Domestic happiness even is not enough, nor all such pleasure as is typified by the symbol of swift transportation, physical excitement, personal risk and danger. Well enough, all this; but not until something else shall be added unto it will life have the richer meanings and implications I am pleading for.

What is this Culture then? Would it invalidate for some of you all I am saying if I were to go back 80 years and summon an interpreter to our aid? Matthew Arnold, a voice crying in the wilderness of British industrialism, and crying somewhat plaintively, it may be, proclaimed Culture to be “a harmonious expansion of all the powers which make the beauty and worth of human nature.” Can you hear that voice today, amid the roar of 80-horse-power motors, the whirr of elevators shooting you to the tops of 60-story buildings, the diapason of great airships ploughing across the sky, 3000 feet above ground, the whining and tom-tomming of dance orchestras, the blare of radio announcers, urging on you the merits of somebody’s shaving cream, or shouting at you as you go along the street, even the clash of printing presses, hurrying out extra editions—can you hear the voice, and will you listen to one to whom the gods of excitement and haste and wealth had no meaning? “The harmonious development of all the powers which make the beauty and worth of human nature.” Somehow I miss there any suggestion of a number of things expressive of life in our time and in our country especially. I hear nothing about what is called “getting immediate results,” about “high-powered salesmanship,” about “pepping it up,” as applied to everything in life, from business to marriage. I cannot associate any “whoopee” with Matthew Arnold, somehow. But I am convinced that it would be wiser for you to learn to honor what he meant by beauty and worth than to read the *New Yorker* each week.

My name is not Jeremias. You might think so. I hope no one will take what I am saying as mere fretful fault-finding with our time, one of the cheapest and easiest of futilities. Our age has been called “The Ugly Civilization,” but there is beauty in the world too, and in nature where man has not had too much desecrating power—

The rainbow comes and goes,

And lovely is the rose;

The moon doth with delight

Look round her when the heavens are bare;

Waters on a starry night

Are beautiful and fair,—

But you shall neither see nor know unless you make a place in your life for observation and contemplation, even for dreaming.

### **Keep Something For Self**

If your capable and it may well be materially successful life is to be given breadth and richness and color, if you are to achieve magnanimity and generosity as well as wealth and power, if art and music are to lend their indispensable aid in making you a cultivated person, if, in a word, you are to enjoy the enlarged happiness that only nature can give you will have to save yourself, even desperately, from some of the things that will tend to draw you into the machinery of existence and destroy your capacity for much that is finest in life. Share your life with others as you can, but keep it in part at least your own. Do not make a fetish of what is called activity. Most activity consists in getting other people to work; and of this you will surely be a victim unless you are on your guard. Make sure the activity is to be fruitful in some real way. “We have

no real business,” said Thoreau, “we have Saint Vitus Dance.” Do not try to read every latest book you hear people talking about. Even in this country there are far too many books published, just as there is far too much of everything else in our day, most of it produced under artificial stimulation and persistent advertising. As for all this reading, all these book clubs and the like, let me commend you again to the Concord philosopher: “How much more worth while that instead of reading the newest book, we should know that which never was old.” The attainment of culture does not come with haste. No joining in the current speed contests of life will bring it nearer, nor ever has. The bloom and fruitage we seek must come slowly, gradually, and naturally, and not be sought in the forcing beds and hothouses of an artificial development.

I do not know of any agency more disastrous to the growth of our impulses toward a way of life that leads out of the flats of existence than the miasmatic atmosphere of vulgarity, of commonness, in which we are forced much of the time to live. This is a curse under which all races abide, one suspects; but democracies are likely to suffer most of all since in them the affliction affects upper as well as lower strata of society. A week or two ago, on a New York Central train, I talked about this very thing with one of the vice-presidents of a great motor car company, a graduate of Princeton, and a cultivated gentleman, as well as a successful business administrator. When I said that I felt we were in danger of being overwhelmed by a tidal wave of vulgarity in life, he replied, “in danger of it? I should say that the flood is already over us. In fact it seems to me that resistance is almost hopeless. There’s little we can do about it.” I hope he was taking too dark a view; but the peril to refinement, to delicacy of thought, to purity of speech, to excellence of taste, is an imminent peril. I am talking about the vulgarity of speech everywhere evident, which takes no account of the beauty and the honorable history of language, but substitutes for right speech the slang of sidewalk and stage; of the pandering to low instincts that fills our news stalls with unspeakable magazines; of the ballyhoo that introduces our motion pictures and even our books; of the quality of much of our entertainment, which is often silly and inane when it is not low; of the mixture of sentimentality, inanity, and alleged humor, that breaks out like a rash over the pages of our Sunday papers; of the quality of much popular song and dance music; of the tone of a vast deal of fiction which presumably in the name of art—for what other name could it invoke?—offers in beautifully skillful language, a report of the aspects of poor human nature that only the physician and the psychiatrist ought to know. I have reached the place where when I see on the jacket of a novel the fatal words “fearless,” or “starkly honest,” I grit my teeth and get ready for what I need scarcely say.

### **Does Not Mean Priggishness**

It is not at all that your effort at developing an intelligent culture shall change you into a Miss Nancy, or make a prig of you. There is no doubt a certain vulgarity in life that is wholesome, and a racy humor that may purge you of melancholy. You need not be denied your bursts of right Rabelaisian laughter; and I do not demand that you should forever walk with Walter Pater and never with Will Rogers. The danger is that the atmosphere of commonness breathed in unconsciously may stifle your budding delicacy of taste and choke the impulses to the cultivation of beauty and worth. Almost before one knows it, one’s language may be debased, one’s standards undermined, one’s sense of discrimination between the genuine and the false blurred.

If you take any stock in what I am saying, you will see that as you come to make appraisal of the past four years, you have a right to ask of the University what it has done to fit you for life not only materially successful, but for an existence broader, richer, more perceptive,

and mentally more fruitful and happy. I do not propose to attack our methods of education. Many of us have had to defend them against the charges of those who proclaim the superior merits of educational training in Europe. Our colleges and universities are making every effort to deal in the best way possible with the human material that comes to them, and to train young Americans for life and work, not in Europe, but in America. I believe the training they give is the best for the purpose. But surely that training ought more and more to include elements that are not purely vocational or technical, elements that shall enable our graduates from the professional schools, as well as from the colleges of liberal arts, to see that a productive being is as important as a productive doing. Why is there any necessary incongruity here? Will it weaken an engineer's bridges if he reads some poetry during his off-duty hours? Poetry, perhaps some engineering students should be told, does not necessarily deal wholly with either the Victorian langours and lilies, roses and raptures, nor with the contemporary mawkish ideas syndicated in a thousand newspapers. Any engineer or lawyer or farmer ought to succumb to the appeal of poets like Masfield and Sandburg and Frost. And why may not a graduate of the colleges of commerce say with Keats, "Much have I traveled in the realms of gold"—though he ought to be warned that Keats' gold had no eagles stamped on it.

### **College Ought to Give It**

Every college then should be a repository and fountain head of culture; but perhaps the colleges of liberal arts more than any other. If not they, who then? Is it too much to ask that a man who teaches you languages or literature, history or philosophy, should also be able to inspire in you, as two or three of my professors inspired in me in my college days, a love for beauty in speech and in the conduct of life, and an appreciation for the fine things, not merely the showy, in art and music and architecture; that he should open to you a dozen vistas in your outlook that will lead you toward beauty and worth; that he should be a realizable model to you in courtesy and considerateness and even in etiquette. I with the beautiful college youth I saw the other day in a restaurant spearing his steak with a fork clutched in his fist might have fallen under the influence of such professors! Have you not a right to demand that these teachers shall have discovered the secret of a rhythm of life that might facilitate your own awkward attempts at adaptation to the world about you and that they should pass that secret along to you?

I assure you that we who teach would like to do all this for you, to be all this to you. If you do not get from us what you hope for, it may be partly your fault, but it is surely partly ours. At the end, what we should like with all sincerity to do for you, is to help you to such a fine discernment of value and quality in your judgments of what life offers you, that when the Daughters of Time, the hypocritic Days, pass solemnly before you, bearing gifts for your choosing, you shall take, not herbs and apples, but bread, diadems, kingdoms, stars.